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ABSTRACT

The effects of a naturally occurring situation on perceived similarity of physically disabled students were investigated with 466 able bodied university students. Within each of three samples (segregated dormitory, integrated dormitory, and integrated roommate), half of the individuals were randomly selected to rate a same-sex able bodied person on a person description questionnaire and the other half were to rate a same-sex disabled person on the same questionnaire. A principle component factor analysis revealed eight factors (interactive, happiness, goodness, self control, dependence, political attitudes, sensitivity, and courageous factors) and pointed out items on which the disabled were seen as significantly different from the able bodied. Findings suggested two conclusions: that as contact between able bodied and disabled is intensified, the stereotype of the disabled diminishes; and that, as contact increases, perceived similarity increases. (CL)

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Perceived Similarity of the Disabled: a Function of Degree on Contact

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The basis of negative attitudes toward the physically disabled is not well understood. One theory posits that the disabled are discriminated against because they are viewed as being different from the able-bodied. It has been found that the able-bodied view the disabled as having different personality traits, moral characteristics, social abilities and political attitudes (Comer and Piliavin, 1975; Weinberg, 1976). Other research (Byrne, 1969) has shown that there is a strong positive relationship between the perceived similarity of an individual and liking for that individual. Persons perceived to be similar to a rater are found to be attractive to that rater while persons perceived as dissimilar are viewed as less likeable by the rater. It is suggested, then, that since the disabled are assumed to be different from the able-bodied, they are viewed by the able-bodied as less interpersonally attractive.

Various methods for altering negative views of the disabled have been examined. Drawing together the results of these efforts, Yuker (1976) concludes that the most positive attitudes result from contact between able-bodied and disabled that is: 1) on an equal status basis; 2) friendly, cooperative and aimed at a common goal; 3) direct and personal; 4) frequent; 5) in a setting that emphasizes the "normality" of the disabled; and 6) supported by the administrative norms of the institution in which it occurs. Underlying many of these conditions is a common goal of increasing perceived similarity of the disabled. If all these conditions were met, presumably, the disabled would, in effect, be treated in much the same way and viewed in the same manner that able-bodied peers are viewed.

The purpose of the present research was to examine whether a naturally occurring situation which approximates Yuker's conditions does in fact enhance perceived similarity of the disabled. The situation investigated was a college dormitory in which able-bodied and disabled reside. In this situation able-bodied and disabled are of similar educational status since both have been admitted to the University by meeting the same academic standards. Further, within this situation there exists the potential for very direct, frequent, and personal contact.

The set up of the campus situation actually offers three different levels of contact. A maximal level of contact in which able-bodied individuals have a roommate who is physically disabled (integrated roommate sample), a more intermediate level of contact in which able-bodied individuals live on a residence hall floor with disabled persons (integrated dormitory sample) and a minimal level, in which the able-bodied individuals live in a dormitory that has no disabled residents (segregated dormitory sample). In this study comparisons were made between the ratings of a disabled person and those made of an able-bodied person by individuals experiencing these different degrees of contact. It was hypothesized that as the degree of contact between able-bodied and disabled increased fewer differences between ratings of the able-bodied and disabled would be found.

Subjects

The research was conducted in living units at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Six dormitory floors were identified which had a minimum of three physically disabled residents. Another six residence hall floors were then identified that were in dormitories that had no physically disabled residents; but best matched the integrated floors in terms of their male-female ratios and the students' years in college.

There were 466 able-bodied students in the sample: 68 females and 197 males in the segregated dormitory sample, 23 females and 147 males in the integrated dormitory sample, and 7 females and 21 males in the integrated roommate sample.

Procedure

Within each of the three samples, (segregated dormitory, integrated dormitory, and integrated roommate), half of the individuals, were randomly selected to rate a same-sex able-bodied person on a person description questionnaire and the other half were to rate a same-sex disabled person on the same questionnaire.

All persons were sent a letter, indicating that the research was concerned with studying how people perceive other people; a person description questionnaire, a scale measuring contact with physically handicapped persons, and a stamped self-addressed envelope for returning the questionnaire.

The person description questionnaire, with a few modifications, was the same as that developed by Weinberg, (1976). The instrument consisted of 32 different personality traits and attitudes with each trait item presented along on a seven point scale. Instructions at the top of the questionnaire specified a type of person the respondent was to rate on each of the items. Males in the disabled condition received questionnaires that asked them to describe "a 20-year old male confined to a wheelchair." Females in the disabled condition were sent questionnaires which asked them to rate "a 20 year old female confined to a wheelchair." In the able-bodied condition, males got questionnaires requesting they rate "a 20-year old male" and females were asked to rate a "20-year old female." Following item 32 on the person description questionnaire four additional items made up a "contact with disabled scale." The respondents were asked to rate how often they (a) saw, (b) talked

with, (c) interacted socially with, and (d) gave assistance to physically disabled people. Two last questions on the questionnaire asked students if they (a) had a physically disabled roommate, and (b) if they had a disabled roommate, did they purposely choose to have a disabled roommate.

Results

Forty-one percent of the segregated dormitory sample, 49% of the integrated dormitory sample and 58% of the integrated roommate sample returned completed questionnaires. Within each sample the return rates for those rating the able-bodied person and those rating the disabled person were about equal.

The first question examined was whether persons from the three contact samples actually experienced different degrees of contact with disabled. Table 1 presents the mean ratings for the three living conditions on the contact with disabled scale. Ratings were made on a five point scale with one representing the least contact and five the most contact. Paired T-test analyses indicated that students in the integrated dormitory, saw /$\bar{T}$(2,188) = 4.38, $p < .05$/ talked with /$\bar{T}$(2,188) = 11.97, $p < .05$/ interacted socially with /$\bar{T}$(2,188) = 9.4, $p < .05$/ and assisted /$\bar{T}$(2,188) = 5.35 $p < .05$/ disabled persons significantly more often then persons in the segregated dormitory sample. Comparing the ratings from the integrated dormitory sample with those from the integrated roommate sample it was found that although persons in the integrated roommate sample saw physically disabled persons in and around campus no more than those in the integrated dormitory sample and assisted persons with a disability just as often; they reported talking to disabled significantly more often /$\bar{T}$(2,100) = 1.80, $p < .05$/ and interacting socially with disabled people significantly more often than those in the integrated dormitory sample /$\bar{T}$(2,100) = 1.70, $p < .05$/. Thus, as assumed, persons in the roommate sample

had the most contact, those in the integrated dormitory sample had somewhat less contact, and persons in the segregated dormitory sample had the least contact with disabled persons.

TABLE 1

Means or Contact With Disabled Scale Items

Contact Item	Living Condition: Segregated Condition	Integrated Condition	Roommate Condition
See disabled in and around campus	4.26	4.78	4.78
Talk with disabled persons	2.16	4.03	4.55
Interact socially with disabled persons	1.62	3.21	3.83
Give assistance to disabled persons	2.54	3.39	3.78
Total contact score	10.59	15.44	16.94

Whether perceptions of the physically disabled vary as a function of contact was investigated next. T-tests were performed comparing ratings made of the disabled person to those made about the able-bodied person within each contact sample. Because of the large number of analyses being performed (32), the level of significance was set at .01 for examining differences in the segregated dormitory and the integrated dormitory sample. However, the less conservative .10 level of significance was used in examining differences between ratings of

able-bodied and disabled in the much smaller integrated roommate sample. This procedure was followed so that if fewer differences between perceptions of able-bodied and disabled were found in the integrated roommate sample this could not simply be attributed to the fact that, there was less power, due to the smaller sample size, to detect differences.

A principle component factor analysis was performed on all questionnaire data. Eight factors emerged from this analysis. Table 2 presents these factors and the items on which disabled were seen as significantly different from the able-bodied. Persons in the segregated dormitory condition viewed the disabled person as differing from the able-bodied person on 14 of the 32 questionnaire items. Several of the differences fell on the interactive factor; on this dimension the disabled person was perceived as less enjoyable to be with, less relaxing to be with, less sexually attractive, less physically attractive and less creative. In terms of the happiness factor the disabled individual was seen as less happy, less cheerful and less popular than the able-bodied person. On the dimension of self control disabled were viewed as less impulsive and less aggressive. Two differences were found on the goodness factor; the disabled person was viewed as more religious and more moral than an able-bodied person. On the dependence factor, disabled were viewed as less self confident and finally on the political attitudes factor, disabled were believed to be more opposed to abortion on demand. No significant differences in ratings of the able-bodied and disabled were found on items of the sensitivity factor or the courageousness factor.

Thus persons with the least contact perceived the disabled person as less interactively attractive, less happy, more self-controlled, more "good," more dependent and more politically conservative. This stereotype is very consistent

with the findings of previous research (Weinberg, 1977 in press) on the able-bodied stereotype of the disabled

TABLE 2

Significant T Values for Differences Between Ratings of Able-bodied and Disabled Within Each Contact Condition

	Segregated Dormitory	Segregated Dormitory	Integrated Roommate
	T = p .01, df=104	T = p .01, df=82	T = p .10, df=16
Interactive Factor			
Sexually Attractive	5.20	4.27	3.45
Physically Attractive	4.89	4.74	2.37
Enjoyable to be with	2.77	2.92	
Relaxing to be with	4.40		
Creative	2.49		
Well adjusted			
Similar to yourself			
Intelligent			
Belief that money is the most important good			
Happiness Factor			
Happy	3.13	(2.23 p < .05)	2.35
Popular	3.75		
Cheerful	2.72		
Goodness Factor			
Religious	5.42	5.81	2.87
Moral	2.76	3.28	
Kind			
Trustworthy			
Honest			
Likeable			
Self Control Factor			
Aggressive	4.68	5.26	2.14
Impulsive	3.48	3.52	
Selfish		2.46	
Self Pitying			
Frustrated with life			
Dependence Factor			
Self Confident	2.92		
Dependent on others for help			
Political Attitudes Factor			
Opposed to abortion on demand	2.57	3.31	
Opposed to liberal issues		2.76	

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Segregated Dormitory	Segregated Dormitory	Integrated Roommate
	T = p .01, df=104	T = p .01, df=82	T = p .10, df=16
Sensitivity Factor			
Sensitive			
Conscientious			
Emotional			
Courageous Factor			
Brave			
Courageous			

In the integrated dormitory condition differences between ratings of the able-bodied and disabled were found on 10 of the 32 items. Living on an integrated dormitory floor and having more contact with the disabled seems to have a modest impact on perceptions of the disabled. Examining the items on which these differences occurred there are a number of similarities to the segregated condition. As table 3 indicates on eight items both groups saw the disabled as different. In each case the direction of the difference was the same. In addition to these 8 items the integrated dormitory sample also rated disabled persons as less selfish, an item which reinforces the notion that disabled are perceived by both groups as more self controlled. Disabled were also seen as more opposed than able-bodied persons to liberal ideas; thus, agreeing with the segregated stereotype of the disabled as more politically conservative. It is however, encouraging to note that persons in the integrated dormitory rated the disabled person as just as relaxing to be with as an able-bodied person, and an equally, creative, popular, cheerful, self-confident and happy as an able-bodied person.

In the integrated roommate condition, where the most extensive contact existed, the fewest differences between ratings of able-bodied and disabled were found. Persons in the roommate condition rated the disabled person differently from the able-bodied person on only 5 of the 32 items. Disabled were rated as less sexually attractive, less physically attractive, more religious, more aggressive, and less happy then the able-bodied person. Interestingly these 5 perceived

differences were generally consistent with differences recorded by persons in both the segregated dormitory and integrated dormitory conditions.

Discussion

These data suggests two major conclusions, first, as contact between able-bodied and disabled is intensified the stereotype of the disabled as different deminishes. It seems that there is a positive relationship between contact and perceived similarity; as contact increases, perceived similarity increases. The second conclusion is somewhat more discouraging. It appears that a very intensive situation in this case, two peers living together in the same room, is needed to affect a major change in perceptions of the disabled. Establishing situations in which this type of contact between able-bodied and disabled can occur is quite limited. If change must take place only in a one-on-one living situation we can only hope to change the attitudes of a very limited number of people for whom this type of intensive contact would naturally occur or could be arranged.

An important question is whether living with a disabled person altered the able-bodied roommate's perception of the disabled or whether persons who already had a positive view of the disabled as, "being generally just like everyone else," sought out disabled roommates. Of our sample of twenty-one persons with disabled roommates, only three indicated that they had purposely chosen to have a disabled roommate. This suggests that for the majority of subjects it was the living condition and not a pre-selection bias that resulted in more "normalized" attitudes toward the disabled.

One issue for future research is to define more specifically the components of an integrated roommate situation that contributes to more favorable views of disabled. Finally, it would also be important to investigate whether or not these favorable attitudes are lasting attitudes with any behavioral implications.

FOOTNOTE 1

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